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**THE MYTH OF THE RUSSIAN EXISTENTIAL THREAT**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines open source material to evaluate the claim that Russia poses an existential threat to NATO. The methodology focuses on Russian capability, capacity, and intention to threaten NATO members' existence. While Russia does possess nuclear weapons, it does not desire nuclear war. Furthermore, the Russian military is comparatively inferior to NATO numerically, technologically, and economically; and faces an uncertain demographic crisis that will limit its capacity to threaten NATO members. Because of this Russia will use other instruments of its national power to protect its interests, such as engaging in hybrid warfare. As such, the current US and NATO foreign policy of punishment and disengagement requires a new strategy that focuses on strengthening the alliance against non-traditional attacks and a return to détente and cooperation with Russia.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In his confirmation testimony to Congress, United States Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that Russia posed the greatest existential threat to the United States.<sup>1</sup> An existential threat is defined as an entity likely to cause damage to such a degree that it terminates one's existence. When determining an existential threat, political and military leaders must assess the threat's capability, capacity, and intention to threaten their country's survival. While Russian military is the world's second strongest military based on quantitative measures, it neglected to modernize and improve the quality of its Cold War forces until recently.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the Russian military is comparatively inferior to NATO numerically, technologically, and economically; and Russia faces an uncertain demographic future that limits its capacity to threaten NATO members. Because of this, Russian foreign policy intentions primarily focus internally, but utilize its other instruments of national power in order to protect its interests.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the assessment of Russia as an existential threat appears overstated. This paper examines Russia's limited capability, capacity, and intention to engage in major combat operations against NATO and recommends a new strategy to improve NATO relations with Russia and ensure member security.

## **RUSSIAN CAPABILITY AND CAPACITY ASSESSMENT**

An initial capability assessment comparing Russia and NATO force size reveals that NATO has far more forces than Russia. As of 2014, NATO had 3,370,000 troops compared to Russia's 766,000 active military members.<sup>4</sup> The United States accounts for 70 percent of NATO's defense expenditures and contributes more than a third to NATO's armed forces. When solely considering the United States' contribution to NATO, the United States' military is quantitatively superior to the Russian military in nearly every category: personnel, aircraft, aircraft carriers, submarines, destroyers and artillery pieces.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the United States

maintains an important technological advantage in the fields of command and control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; precision guided munitions and unmanned aerial vehicles that contribute the most to the capability gap between the two militaries.<sup>6</sup> According to Sam Perlo-Freeman, director of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “In terms of military capabilities, the US and NATO will remain absolutely unmatched for the foreseeable future.”<sup>7</sup> He goes on to state Russia’s military forces are far behind NATO in terms of modernization of weapon systems and mobility, limiting its ability to fight modern warfare.<sup>8</sup>

However, in the past decade, Russia has invested significantly in its military after years of neglect.<sup>9</sup> “The ambition of the political leadership to strengthen Russian military capability has already resulted in visible improvements.”<sup>10</sup> Yet, these improvements have merely begun the reversal of Russian military decline. Russia’s military modernization focuses on almost every piece of equipment: new tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, precision weapons, helicopters, aircraft, command and control and intelligence platforms.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, prior to its present economic troubles, Russia still planned on Soviet-era equipment comprising 20 – 30 percent of its inventory in 2020.<sup>12</sup> Now, Russia’s modernization profile must adjust and significant technological gaps with NATO will persist.

In addition to the technological gap caused by years of neglected modernization, limited strategic mobility adversely impacts Russia’s traditional warfare capability. Russian ground forces are highly dependent upon railways, and the Soviet-era equipment of Russian ground maneuver elements is too heavy for existing deteriorated Russian roads. Because of this, Russia must continue to modernize, transitioning to lighter vehicles, and invest in its transportation infrastructure. “Without them [railway and road infrastructure], today’s capacity will not significantly increase.”<sup>13</sup> While Russia needs to modernize its military equipment and increase

its mobility capability, it also faces accession problems exacerbated by demographic realities inside Russia.<sup>14</sup>

President Putin set a goal for the Russian Armed Forces to grow to 1 million personnel by 2015. So far, Russia has not met this goal. The problem of employing the required personnel is twofold. First, Russia seeks to improve the professionalism of its forces by increasing the number of contracted personnel, which increases personnel costs. This initiative increases the personnel budget by an estimated 40 percent. Additionally, the Russian Ministry of Defense planned to increase its number of conscripts to achieve the 1 million personnel target, but the “whole population in the able-bodied age groups is shrinking and the Armed Forces will have to compete with the civil labor market for recruits.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in 2012, “live births outnumbered deaths for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union.”<sup>16</sup> Russia will have 10 million fewer people of working age in the next 10 years. Furthermore, only half of the 700,000 yearly average conscript population is eligible or fit to serve.<sup>17</sup> Thus, “the major constraints for the future size of Russia’s Armed Forces will be its demographic situation and the levels of defence spending.”<sup>18</sup> However, Russia’s defense spending is largely dependent upon the health of its economy.

Today, the Russian economy struggles through 2016 in its second year of recession while combating high inflation, experiencing nearly 17% inflation in 2015. The steep decline in fossil fuel prices has hurt Russian budget revenues, and the ruble has lost more than half its value since 2014 putting greater pressure on the Russian economy and the Russian people.<sup>19</sup> This has led to over 19.2 million Russians living in poverty in 2015, or 13.4% of the population, according to Russian Federal Statistics Service.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, capital investment, the second largest contributor to growth, declined 8.4% and Russian disposable income has dropped 6.4% from

February 2015.<sup>21</sup> If these economic strains on the population continue, it could result in domestic turmoil inside of Russia or lower worker productivity. Already, Russia suffers from low worker productivity, “estimated at between 2.5 and 3 times lower than in the developed countries.”<sup>22</sup> Further reductions in productivity could significantly reduce Russia’s ability to project military power. This puts the Russian government at a budgetary crossroad where it must decide to spend more on domestic programs or on defense.

While a weak economy has not stopped countries from waging war, economic struggles impact a country’s ability to modernize and invest in expanding its military capability. A report published by CAST, a Moscow-based defense think tank, stated, “Russia’s military spending has reached a crisis. The modern Russian economy just does not generate enough resources to finance the current 2011-2020 rearmament program. This seriously reduces the ability to efficiently renew the Russian armed forces’ equipment.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, until the economy recovers, Russia will either reduce the procurement of new equipment; extend the acquisition timeline, or both. Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged in May of 2015 that Russia’s modernization timeline would need to shift stating, “This is connected not only with economics, but also with the fact that the [defense] industry is not entirely ready to produce certain types of weapons on time.”<sup>24</sup> Putin’s statement reveals that in addition to economic constraints, Russia also has an inefficient defense industry that limits its ability to fight a major combat operation against NATO.

The main problem for the Russian defense industry and the root of its inefficiency is corruption. Russia’s chief military prosecutor estimates that nearly 20 percent of the defense budget disappears due to corruption. This corruption cost the government 7 billion Russian rubles (\$220 million USD) in 2012.<sup>25</sup> The prosecutor also found bribes rose by 33 percent,

appropriations doubled, and fraud increased by 20 percent.<sup>26</sup> The revelation of this widespread corruption led to the dismissal of the Russian Minister of Defense, Anatolii Serdiukov. However, his replacement, Sergei Shoigu, has done little to address the deeply rooted corruption within the industry inhibiting Russia's ability to efficiently develop new weapons systems.

Another contributing factor to the inefficiency of the sector is that the industries are mainly state-owned and controlled. Russia has not reformed its defense companies since the Reagan administration. The Russian Audit Chamber reported to the Duma Defense Commission in 2012, "30 percent of the defense industrial companies were loss-making."<sup>27</sup> Further, the agency found only 20 percent of defense companies fit to attempt modernization, and the remaining 50 percent so decrepit, were recommended for replacement or shuttering.<sup>28</sup> Defense companies controlled by the state have little incentive to control costs because the government covers the companies' losses. This inefficient paradigm of incentives only perpetuates more corruption.

However, more significant than Russia's limited military capability, economic capacity, and inefficient military industrial complex is its looming demographic crisis. For over 30 years, Russia has maintained negative population trends, most significantly in negative birth rate and low life expectancy.<sup>29</sup> In a 2015 study by the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA), it estimates the population of Russian women between the ages of 20 to 29 will shrink by 50 percent in the next decade.<sup>30</sup> The combination of low birth rates and low life expectancy mean that Russia's population could decrease by more than 20 percent by 2050. RANEPA assesses that a worst-case scenario could see the population fall by a third to 100 million by that time.<sup>31</sup> "The economic effects of such a shift would be dramatic; Russia's working-age population would decrease by more than 26 million, making the

country less productive and less prosperous.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, little opportunity exists to address Russian population demographics, and long-term population decline will likely characterize Russia’s future. The population decline will reduce the size of the armed forces, stunt economic growth and capacity, and result in further labor shortages within the Russian economy and defense industry. Thus, Russia’s capability to threaten the existence of NATO countries remains limited.

## **RUSSIAN INTENTIONS**

However, despite this, Western leaders remain concerned about Russia’s intention to threaten its neighbors. While outside observers can roughly measure and interpret military capability, intent remains ambiguous and not fully known. General Philip Breedlove, Supreme Allied Commander Europe, testified to Congress in April of 2015, “We cannot fully grasp Putin’s intent. What we can do is learn from his actions, and what we see suggests growing Russian capabilities, significant military modernization, and an ambitious strategic intent.”<sup>33</sup> However, stated Russian foreign policy and their national security strategy provide insight into Russian intentions.

According to Russian foreign policy documents to the European Union, Russia assesses “the system of international relations is in transition as a new polycentric world order.”<sup>34</sup> Russia perceives itself as one of the centers of the new system and a global leader. In this document, Russia conveys two main themes, an inward focus on developing the Russian economy and insecurity due to expansion into its perceived center of influence.<sup>35</sup> Russia expresses its desire to create favorable conditions to “ensure sustainable economic growth and thus a higher quality of life for Russian citizens.”<sup>36</sup> In order to do this, Russia seeks to cooperate with any country willing “to cooperate in line with the principles of equality, mutual respect, mutual benefit and

norms of international law, as well as recognition of the central role of the United Nations in global affairs.”<sup>37</sup>

Subsequently, Russia articulates this sense of global leadership and security concerns through its explanation of the Ukrainian crisis. Russia argues intervention was necessary to protect Russian security because the West had pursued a policy of expanding areas under their control for the past 25 years. “This was manifested by successive waves of NATO expansion despite assurances to the contrary at the highest level and in violation of solemn declarations on the establishment of a system of equal and indivisible security in the Euro-Atlantic space. The current negative turn in global affairs is not our choice. Russia will continue working under these circumstances and remains open for dialogue.”<sup>38</sup> While differing assessments of the veracity and reality of these statements exist, Russia has been consistent on its position against NATO expansion and its perceived threat since 1992.<sup>39</sup> However, despite this sense of insecurity Russia does not threaten or express armed conflict as the solution. Rather, the foreign policy document concludes, “There is no viable alternative to mutually beneficial and equal-footed cooperation between Russia and the EU, as our countries are closely intertwined by virtue of numerous geographic, economic, historical, and human ties.”<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, Russia’s National Security Strategy articulates similar themes of prestige, global leadership, and an internal focus. The strategy document is divided into sections on national defense, economic growth, science and technology, education, health, culture, environment, quality of life for Russians and state and social security. These sections mainly focus on Russian development and reveal the primary focus of Russian foreign policy and security.<sup>41</sup> However, the strategy document indicates a broad range of threats to Russian national

security like global instability, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, information warfare, corruption, subversion, and a range of transnational threats.<sup>42</sup>

The strategy describes Western influence and past international actions as stoking instability and conflict abroad. It lists Western support for the overthrow of the Ukrainian government and the rise of the Islamic State as “challenges to Russian interests.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, the security strategy echoes the Russian foreign policy document to the EU, claiming the United States and its allies desire to constrain Russia in order to dominate world affairs. The strategy also addresses NATO as a danger because of its expansion toward Russian borders. What is important to note is the document’s characterization of the United States and NATO as dangers. Past documents identified the two as threats. “In Russian military parlance, a danger is a concern, while a threat could spark conflict.”<sup>44</sup> So, while Russia considers the US and NATO as dangers to its interests, Russia recognizes it requires their cooperation to address the greater threats of terrorism, instability, and weapons proliferation.<sup>45</sup> Despite Russia’s stated intentions and limited military capability, Western leaders consider recent Russian military modernization and interventions in Ukraine and Syria as indications of Russia’s ill intentions.

Indeed Russia has sought to modernize its military and it has doubled its military budget since 2007.<sup>46</sup> Russia’s defense spending has risen to 4.8 percent of gross domestic product in 2015. The aim for the 2015 budget was to replace 30 percent of Russian equipment with modern weapons. However, because of the troubled Russian economy, the government cut total defense spending by 5 percent and delayed some of the modernization.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the defense budget now consumes 34 percent of the overall Russian budget, double the United States. However, the actual amount in US dollars was \$84 billion compared to \$615 billion spent on US defense.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, while Russia is increasing its spending on modernizing its forces, the

reality is that so are many militaries around the globe, including the US, China, and Saudi Arabia. The biggest difference is Russia neglected to modernize its forces for almost a quarter of a century.

In addition to Russia's military modernization, NATO is concerned about Russia's recent military actions in the Ukraine and Syria. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg commented, "Russia has invested heavily in defence, [and] shown it can deploy forces at very short notice...above all it has shown a willingness to use force."<sup>49</sup> The Western perspective of Russia's intervention in Ukraine is one that views Russian actions as acting against the democratic values and interests of NATO and the EU and violated the sovereignty of a nation. The Russian perspective of the Ukrainian crisis, as previously mentioned, is that "Russia did not start the war in the Ukraine, but responded to Western aggression. The Maidan uprising and ousting of Viktor Yanukovych as Ukraine's president were engineered by American special services to move NATO closer Russia's borders."<sup>50</sup> These two perspectives form an impasse. NATO views Russia's defense modernization and utilization of its military as threatening and Russia feels threatened by NATO's expansion along its borders and feels obligated to protect its interests. Subsequently, Russia's deployment to Syria also concerns NATO.

Contrary to popular rhetoric, the purpose of Russia's deployment to Syria was not to divert attention away from the Ukraine or to saber rattle. Rather, the deployment sought to secure Russian interests and provide military assistance at the behest of the Syrian government. Moscow has had close ties with Syria since the 1950's, and together they signed the Soviet Union's first arms deal in 1954.<sup>51</sup> Russia's access to the port of Tartus in Syria is the new home of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, and Russia's involvement in Syria's civil war sought to stabilize the regime and prevent the 2,000 Muslim fighters from the Russian Caucasus from returning and

deepening the Islamic insurgency in Chechnya.<sup>52</sup> While this action demonstrates Russian capability to deploy and sustain operations away from Russia, it was a rather small contingent.

Yet, this small deployment does demonstrate a capability that Russia could not execute a few years ago.<sup>53</sup> Russia's initial military actions showcased its cruise missiles and precision munitions and provided operational testing of its new weapons, helicopters, and aircraft. Subsequently, the Russian air force executed the majority of the air campaign from high altitude and with non-precision weapons causing significant collateral damage.<sup>54</sup> Benjamin Lambeth, an air warfare expert at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, critiqued the campaign as mostly sloppy and indifferent to killing of innocent civilians.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, while Russia's military actions are worthy of note, they do not demonstrate a profound new capability that threaten military parity with NATO or the United States.

Thus, if Russia does not pose an existential threat to the US or NATO in a traditional military sense, it will most likely defend its interests in a nontraditional manner. The preferred method of Russia will be to use a combination of instruments of power to achieve its aims. This type of warfare is intentionally ambiguous and challenges opponents to determine the source of the threat and the state's intentions. This characteristic will make a timely NATO response very difficult.

Particularly at risk are the Baltic States—Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania—two of which have large Russian-speaking minorities.<sup>56</sup> It will be difficult for NATO to be responsive in a timely manner and decide whether an Article 5 attack has occurred.<sup>57</sup> Further challenging is determining if the threat is internal or external as Russia pursues tactics of destabilization through influence in political minority groups and activists. Russia influences these populations in the Baltics through their “Compatriots Policy”, providing activists and political groups

financial support.<sup>58</sup> As such, NATO appears ill prepared for the more likely risks of subversion and destabilization across Europe and is in need of an effective Russian strategy.<sup>59</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE NATO-RUSSIAN ENGAGEMENT**

NATO, led by the US, has primarily adopted a punishment and disengagement strategy with Russia for the past 20 years. This strategy has proven ineffective and dangerous, as it does not take into account a comprehensive perspective that includes Russian history or culture. The punishment and disengagement strategy focuses on traditional military aggression and if NATO truly seeks to influence Russia, NATO's foreign policy must understand Russian behavior from the Russian perspective. NATO's punishment and disengagement strategy uses military and economic punishment, then seeks to isolate Russia from the global community and downplay its influence.<sup>60</sup> However, Russian history provides insight into why this strategy may not effectively influence Russian foreign policy.

For the last three centuries, since Peter the Great, Russia has been an influential European power and this identity is deeply rooted in the Russian psyche.<sup>61</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while other European countries expanded their imperial empires into Africa, the Americas and Asia, Russia remained mainly a continental power. With its large land mass and long borders, Russia expanded by absorbing its neighbors. These long borders and a history of invasions by other large European and Asian powers has made border security and regional influence among border countries extremely important to the Russian empire.<sup>62</sup>

With this context in mind, a strategy of resilience and engagement may be more successful than the current NATO strategy for Russia. The resilience and engagement strategy focuses on countering hybrid warfare by strengthening the resilience of NATO members to internal and external coercion and reducing vulnerabilities.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, this strategy would

accept Russia's regional influence on its neighbors. However, the strategy does not defer to Russia on NATO interests in those countries, nor is it characterized by the large powers making decisions for smaller states. The goals of cooperation seek to convey NATO's resolve and de-escalation.<sup>64</sup> From a certain perspective, this strategy is a return to détente.

Similar to the Cold War, Russia respects the military capability of NATO and seeks to avoid direct military confrontation with the alliance. Therefore, NATO must reduce vulnerabilities to Russian approaches that seek to erode the cohesion of the alliance. Russia is more likely to attack utilizing cyber, economic, information, and political tools that weakens the alliance through bilateral relations between Russia and individual NATO countries. In order to counter these threats, NATO must focus on "strengthening the performance and resilience of infrastructure important for responding to unconventional and nonmilitary coercion, such as command and control, intelligence, cyber, and civilian energy transport infrastructure."<sup>65</sup> This approach strengthens alliance members while promoting an integrated Europe, and seeks to influence Russia positively, moving away from the punishment and disengagement strategies currently employed. Russia's use of institutions to bolster legitimacy and prestige creates an opportunity to use liberal institutionalist frameworks to avoid adversarial zero-sum outcomes.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, Western leaders are using exaggerated rhetoric describing Russia as an existential threat. While Russia does possess a respectable military capability to threaten Europe, it is far inferior to NATO's military capability. Years of neglect and economic hardship following the end of the Cold War left the Russian Armed Forces in a deteriorated state. Russia has reprioritized its resources to rebuild its military to modern standards. However, Russia has found this task difficult as it struggles with internal discord, budgetary and economic pressures,

and an uncertain future as its population contracts and impoverishment grows. Russia's intent is similar to other states. It desires to pursue its interests, make the lives of its people better, and garner international respect. As such, Russia does not pose a traditional military existential threat to NATO. Yet, Russia perceives NATO as expansionist and an existential threat to its existence. With both NATO and Russia viewing each other as existential threats, the possibility for escalation and miscalculation increases, putting the peace and safety of Europe at risk. NATO should adopt a strategy of cooperation and strengthen the alliance against non-traditional attacks. In the near-term NATO should focus internally and reduce its societal vulnerabilities. Ultimately, this strategy best ensures peace on the European peninsula and appropriately identifies NATO's existential threat: its own cohesion.



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